

Farm-to-School Programs in Montana

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)



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Montana
Office of Public Instruction
Denise Juneau, State Superintendent

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What is Farm to School?

Farm to School refers to school-based programs that connect children to their food source through a three component approach. These components include:

- Inclusion of locally produced foods on school meal and snack menus and through other venues such as student stores, or fundraising efforts.
- Nutrition education curriculum and experiential learning opportunities in the classroom or through school gardens or farm field trips.
- Connecting school children with farmers, ranchers and food businesses within their community.

What are the Benefits of a Farm-to-School Program?

While the overall goal is to connect children to their food source, Farm-to-School programs also result in benefits to parents, families, local farmers and ranchers and the overall community.

Benefits to children and their families:

- Research shows that students who participate in Farm-to-School programs show an increased willingness to try new fruits and vegetables. Kids that have easy access to a variety of high-quality fruits and vegetables eat more of them. By combining increased access to local, and fresh, fruits and vegetables with Farm-to-School educational activities, children demonstrate healthier nutrition behaviors. Taking part in a Farm-to-School program helps children expand the variety of their food choices and motivates them to eat and enjoy a healthy diet.
- School gardens provide a venue for the whole family to become involved and, therefore, the benefits of Farm-to-School are expanded to home and family.
- Through Farm-to-School activities, children and teens learn about the many important aspects and influences on the food system including agricultural production, food access and food security, ecological issues, food safety, nutrition and culinary skills.

Benefits to local farmers and their communities:

- The Farm-to-School program creates a new market opportunity for farmers within their own communities. By establishing a “forward contract” with a school district, farmers

can plan their crop plantings and volume knowing that they have a committed buyer for their fresh harvest.

- The Farm-to-School program creates more security for local farmers, allowing them to continue farming on their land preserving the agricultural heritage of our communities.

Benefits to school food service program and schools:

- Farm-to-School is a marketing “win”! This program can enhance student and staff participation in school meal programs by offering fresh and delicious foods.
- The Farm-to-School program presents a natural connection between the school food service program and the curriculum. The cafeteria becomes part of the learning environment for the students.
- The Farm-to-School program provides a wonderful opportunity for the school food service staff to connect with farmers and food producers in their community and become important stakeholders in improving their community’s ability to feed itself with healthy, delicious foods.
- Garden-based learning provides many opportunities for teachers to address a wide-variety of content standards across core curriculum subject areas.

What do we mean by “local food”?

There is no uniform definition for “local” or “regional,” which allows schools to develop one that makes sense for their area. For example, the state of Montana is often used as a boundary, but this may not be appropriate for those living near our state’s borders. Instead, a 100 or 200-mile radius might work better, but the goal is to increase the sale of high-quality food products which brings an economic benefit to the general area.

How do I start the local buying process?

First and foremost, evaluate your current food purchases to determine what products you are already procuring locally. Many Montana schools are already buying milk products or grain products locally. Then, review your lunch and breakfast menus to determine the items that may be available from Montana sources. There are several strategies for connecting to sources of local food products in your area. They include:

- Visit the Farm to School section of the Montana OPI School Nutrition Programs Web site (http://opi.mt.gov/Programs/SchoolPrograms/School_Nutrition/index.html). The Farm-to-School tab is on the left menu. Once in the Farm to School section click “Resources for School Food Professionals” tab. Here you will find links to resources that identify Montana farmers, ranchers and food businesses.
- Ask your current food distributor for a list of local products that they carry. Most of the major food distribution companies have this information readily available.
- During the summer months, visit your area Farmers’ Markets and meet the local farmers and ranchers. Ask about their farms and inquire as to whether they would be interested now, or into the future in providing product for school meals. For a complete listing of Farmers’ Markets in Montana, go to:
<http://agr.mt.gov/farmersmarkets/FarmersMarkets2Montana2009.pdf>.

I barely have the time to get things done in my food service program currently, how will I find the time to seek out local products from individual farmers?

Time is a very important consideration in order to successfully incorporate local products in your school meals program. Below are several different strategies that have worked for other food service directors throughout Montana and the nation. One, or a combination, of these strategies may be just the ticket for you to get started with bringing locally grown food into your school meals program.

- Talk with your food distributor (FSA or SYSCO, for example) and ask them to give you a list of the Montana or regional products that they carry. It may be as simple as switching to the local version of products you already order from this distributor. Start with just one or two products that you order regularly.
- Consider bringing in a FoodCorps volunteer to get your Farm-to-School program started. FoodCorps is a program that originated in Montana through the Grow Montana Coalition, and is a unique utilization of AmeriCorps volunteers. These FoodCorps volunteers do their year of service with a school/university foodservice operation for the expressed purpose of increasing the presence of local foods in the school. Very often, the FoodCorps volunteer also helps with Farm-to-School education and outreach activities within the school and community. To learn more about FoodCorps, visit the Grow Montana Web site at:
<http://www.growmontana.ncat.org/projects.php>.

- Consider converting just **one** menu item to the locally sourced version of that item. Think about products that you buy a lot of (milk, beef, wheat flour, bread, carrots, potatoes, other?) - can you find a local source for just this one item? This “one item” approach is much less overwhelming than trying to convert your entire operation to locally sourced food. Every dollar redirected to Montana food producers is another dollar that stays in the state and is circulated through multiple economic sectors within the local or regional economy.
- Connect with other food service program professionals that are buying locally through joining the Farm to Cafeteria Connections listserv, through the Grow Montana Coalition. Go to: http://www.growmontana.ncat.org/farm_cafe/ . This network of food service professionals, farmers, distributors and food and agricultural specialists can assist you in your efforts to procure foods locally.

What Montana-grown crops are being served in Montana schools?

Montana school foodservice directors are purchasing a wide variety of items from Montana farmers including:

Onions, potatoes, garlic, squash, melons, apples, lettuce, milk, cheese, eggs, beef, pork, lentils, wheat flour and many other items.

Does fresh produce need to be inspected by the Montana Department of Agriculture or a local sanitarian before I use it?

No formal inspections are required of fresh, raw produce. Processed items must follow food safety and licensure requirements established by the state Department of Health and Human Services and the local county sanitarian’s office.

As with any food served to children, food safety considerations regarding locally sourced products should be an important priority for the food service program. School food service directors and staff receive continued training on safe food handling practices, including critically evaluating food upon receipt and purchase. This training, called ServSafe, is the industry’s standard for educating food service professionals. It is the foundation of a food safety plan and complements the school food service Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) process. Utilize this training well and examine all food upon receipt. It is acceptable to reject deliveries if you have any concern about the integrity of the product. For more information on ServSafe or

a HACCP food safety plan, please go to the following Web site:

http://opi.mt.gov/Programs/SchoolPrograms/School_Nutrition/#gpm1_8.

Communicate your expectations regarding the condition of the delivered product to the food producer. Things such as delivery containers, cleanliness of product, and temperature of delivered product are important criteria to be communicated to the food producer. If you are considering establishing a forward contract (a formal commitment to purchase their product) with a producer, incorporate these delivery details within your forward contract.

Note* Remember, all meat and poultry that is purchased by schools must come from a state or federally inspected processing facility.

How is the delivery/distribution of food different in a Farm-to-School Program?

The transport of farm fresh food products to the school can sometimes be the most challenging part of having a successful Farm-to-School program. However, there is no “one size fits all” solution to distribution. The following are examples of several different possibilities for the purchase/delivery of farm fresh foods to schools:

- ***Scenario 1 - School foodservice programs purchase directly from an individual farmer.***

In this case, delivery of the product is arranged as part of the purchasing agreement with this local farmer.

- ***Scenario 2 - School foodservice programs purchase from farmer cooperatives.***

This is often a preferred scenario to purchasing from one individual farmer, especially when a larger, steady supply of product is needed at a school/district. Farmer cooperatives have a centralized structure for ordering products, and once again, the delivery of products is something to be worked out in your purchasing agreement.

- ***Scenario 3 - School foodservice programs purchase local food through traditional distributor.***

By asking for local products to be carried by your local distributor, you are helping to create demand that will ultimately result in a wider variety of local products being carried by the large, traditional food distributors. Keep in mind, what is carried from local sources may change with the season, so plan your menus with seasonality in mind.

- ***Scenario 4 - School foodservice programs purchase local food at farmers' markets.***

For smaller school foodservice programs, purchasing local food products at farmers' markets is a successful strategy incorporating fresh, local products on your school menus. It is best to contact the farmer a day or two in advance of the farmer's market and place your order by phone or fax. This way, the order will be all ready for pick-up at

the farmer's market. Of course, in Montana the farmer's market season only extends about one month into the school year. So this strategy is very limited for Montana schools, with the exception of those also running summer feeding programs.

How can I afford to purchase locally?

Addressing this challenge requires a shift in thinking as it raises the questions of a product's price versus its value. Following are a few considerations in working with what are sometimes (but not always) higher costs of Farm-to-School products.

- First, it is important to remember that school foodservice programs can purchase locally grown produce with the same federal reimbursement money that is used to buy other food for their programs.
- It is also important to remember that fresh, local food often tastes better and has higher nutritional content than their conventional counterparts, and increased costs reflect a superior product.
- Local foods have been found to have higher longevity and yields, such as with farm-fresh greens that have a longer shelf life and allow a higher percentage of the case to be used, or local beef that is leaner and has less variation between purchased and cooked weight.
- Research shows that the Farm-to-School program which consistently offers fresh and delicious local foods has found their school meal participation rates to increase, especially among teachers and administration.
- Creative menus can also help control costs of higher-quality products, such as developing recipes to use lesser-known cuts of meat.
- Schools that "forward contract" with farmers have found that by agreeing to purchase large-volumes of their crop they can negotiate a very competitive price.
- Purchase in volume through a cooperative bid process or through your current distributor. School Nutrition Programs of the Office of Public Instruction offer a Cooperative BID Program which can be a source for local products at a competitive price. The major food distribution companies in Montana continue to carry more and more local products in response to customer demand. These products can be delivered with your regular order, thus saving the cost of a special delivery.
- Monitoring food waste is also an effective way to control food costs.

Remember ... Have fun with these programs and it's OK to start small!

